

The Pheasant-Hunting Alternative

by Steve Smith

We are dealing with a sad story here, one we have not had to contemplate since the 1985 Farm Bill, and the Conservation Reserve Program it created, came into being: There are not going to be as many pheasants nor places to hunt them as there has been for the past 23 years; CRP acres are being pulled out of the program by the millions, and those that are left, too often are being grazed or hayed. What I just wrote and what follows is, of course, conjecture because we don't know how things are going to play out. But please don't get discouraged and stop reading – depending on your point of view, it may not as dark as we think.

You may not agree with this, but with corn for ethanol and some other crops at an all-time market high, and with a significant percentage of the world's population unable to get enough to eat, I am afraid that the days of being able to count on millions of acres of farmland being set aside to grow grass – and pheasants and quail – are over. It is a luxury no one can any longer afford. There will be some hunt-able land left in CRP, waterways and areas of fragile soils, but the acres they occupy will be far less than what we've been used to. We have lived through the pheasant boom, and I hope you raised and trained and hunted with and buried a few good dogs during that time. I did.

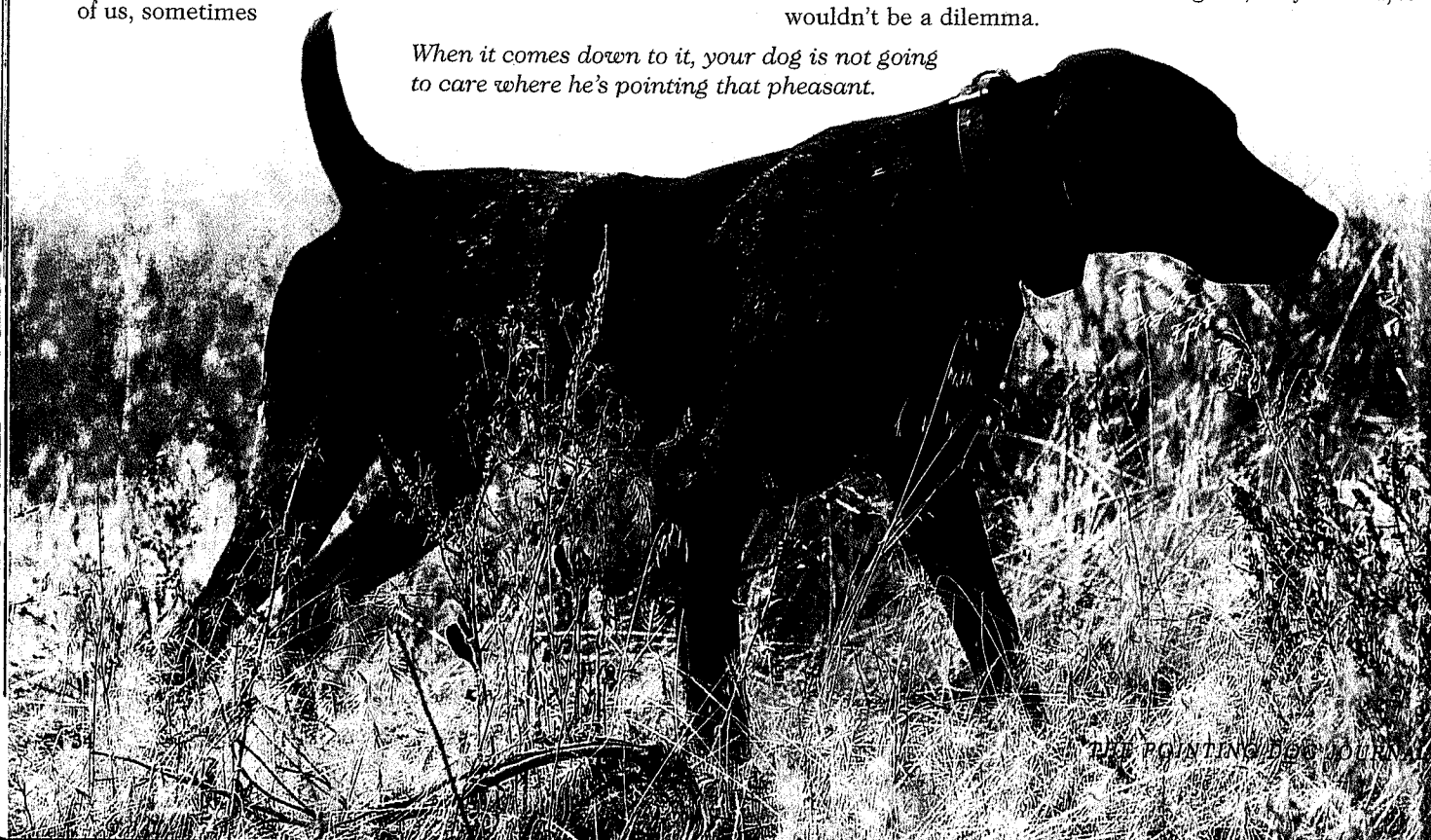
The annual trip to the prairies of the upper Midwest, during those years, became a tradition for tens of thousands of us, sometimes

more than one trip and more than one state. We got to know certain farmers like they were family, certain motels and restaurants like they were our homes, certain sleepy little towns like we were born and raised there. To be sure, The Trip became more than a chance to see and hunt and enjoy flocks of pheasants. But it was for the pheasants, and to a lesser extent bobwhites, that we went and went again. Oh sure, I know – the vast majority of upland hunters *don't* make a pilgrimage anywhere; many never go and have never gone anyplace except our home states. But a large number do, and those are the ones who don't like what's happening.

Of course, even if CRP were still in full flower, getting there, which used to be half the fun, would end up being half the expense; \$3.50-\$4 gasoline, maybe higher by the time you read this, will do that, especially if you're young, your family is young, and The Trip budget was often tight to begin with. I know a few hunters who skipped The Trip when gas went to \$2.25 a gallon – ah, for \$2 gas again.... So we have a dilemma: Sure, it'll be expensive, but the land and the birds won't be there like they were.

What can we do, if anything? To every dilemma, of course, there is always a list of less-than-satisfactory answers and tough choices, and this one's no different. If there was a good, easy answer, it wouldn't be a dilemma.

When it comes down to it, your dog is not going to care where he's pointing that pheasant.





1. **Quit hunting.** Worst possible solution, and of course we won't do that. The dog won't allow it.
2. **Go anyway.** Suck it up, pay the money, take a chance you'll be able to find a place to hunt; if nothing else, there ought to be fewer other hunters competing for the same places, and the chances are this year will still be pretty good.
3. **Switch your focus.** Like to a different species of bird; many have already decided to do just that, to find out what this sharptail and Hun' culture is all about. Of course, depending on where you live, the drive and expense could be even more than going to the eastern Dakotas.
4. **Stay home and hunt local pheasants.** Especially if you live in a marginal state – Wisconsin, New York, Michigan. We've even done a story on this, and it's a good alternative for many of us who gave up hunting pheasants at home when the bird populations boomed elsewhere.
5. **Spend time at a shooting preserve.** You knew I would get around to this one eventually.

Shooting preserves get rapped for a number of reasons; let's look at some basic objections and address them.

I'll never pay for hunting, period. If it's a matter of principle and not dollars and cents, there's nothing we can do about that. The only thing I would say is that hunting (and fishing) is about the only hugely popular recreational activity in the country that a large percentage of its participants expect to

be able to do for free. *Look, I bought these golf clubs, bought the shoes, paid for lessons... I'll be dipped if I'm going to pay someone to let me play, too!*

I really prefer to hunt wild birds. Don't we all? And some of us will never set foot on a preserve except to do a little dog training. But let me tell you a short story. About 12 years ago, I was in South Dakota with the late Dave Meisner, hunting near Chamberlain. It was early December, wild birds, and the birds were very wild. We were working a wide strip of standing corn with knee-high grass, not much chance to get dog work, but that's where the birds were.

As we approached the end of the field, the pheasants started coming up by the dozens. Two roosters flushed almost at my feet, and I dropped both, a rarity in itself, quickly reloaded, and shot a late-flushing bird, to both my and the pheasant's surprise. My three-bird limit complete, I turned to Meisner, who had shot a bird himself and missed another, to gloat, and he said, "Think how [word *universally* recognized to mean upset, irritated, or irked] we'd be if we were at a shooting preserve and these were released birds." It's funny, I think you'll agree – wild birds, plenty of them, and easy shots, and it's memorable hunting, though over too soon. Same exact scene at a shooting preserve, and it's too tame. Humans.

Even if I wanted to, preserves are expensive. That is correct, some of them, which are more "lodges," shooting resorts that offer rooms, meals, open bars, bird cleaning, guides with dogs if you want, and all the rest, can be incredibly so. But... how much was The Trip going to cost us? How much did the dog cost; and your shotgun; and your gear; and the 4X4 we always buy to haul all our stuff around in?

See, almost all day-place preserves – the local pheasant farm, the sort I'm talking about here – charge on a per-released bird basis; but when we head out of state, we never, or rarely, compute the cost of a bird in the bag. The state of South Dakota figures that in 2006 a non-resident hunter typically spent an average of \$1,000 during his five-day stay, and I don't think that included the \$100-plus license. But let's say it did, and he shot his legally allowed 15 birds. The math says those birds cost \$66.66 each, and that's if Our Hero gets his limit; and that didn't figure in the cost of getting to and from the state – gas, food, maybe a motel room each way. The Trip's cost per bird, of course, has always been a closely guarded secret the guilty seldom share with She Who Is Angered When The Seat Is Left Up.

The Trip is also my vacation, a chance to get away and kick back with a couple buddies for a few days. A shooting preserve near home won't let me do that.

I didn't say preserves were a better choice than trips, just an option. On the other hand, spending five Saturdays in a row at a preserve won't burn five days of your vacation time, so you'll have those available to clean gutters and sweep out the garage!

There's something artificial about knowing that this 40-acre field has only six or eight pheasants in it that were released for me. There is, of course, the element of mystery that's missing from a preserve when compared with a wild-bird hunt, and that's a turnoff for a lot of people. It's something you can either accept and get on with it, work around, or it's too big a deal and ruins the experience. We

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each have to make that call. A lot of wingshooters, including a large percentage of those who read this magazine, get much of their shooting at preserves, so it can be done.

The birds are no challenge; they're too easy to hunt.

Well, maybe, maybe not. Since they are released, they are not born and raised in that cover, so they don't know where to go to escape. And that means your normal strategies – *Let's see, the sun's getting lower, so they've probably moved to feed* – aren't going to work; the birds can be anywhere.

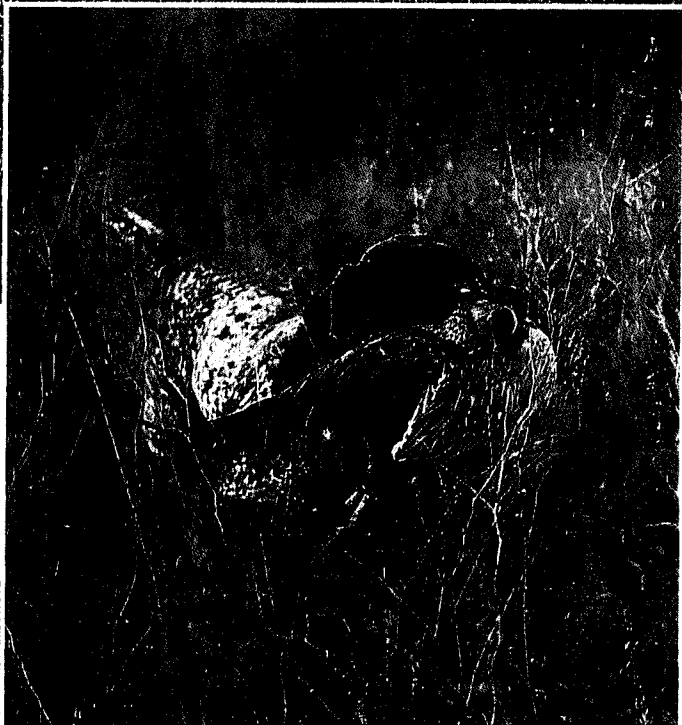
There are other pluses to a shooting preserve, some we don't think of very often and don't affect all of us. For example, when my older son Chris, just out of college, single, footloose, and cruising the country hunting several weeks a year, life was good (Jake got married in graduate school, but school was in South Dakota). After four or five years of that, Chris meets a girl way too good for him and gets married. No problem – it was still off to Saskatchewan or the plains every year.

Then, after several years, comes Kid One followed by Kid Two. Those of you who have young children, and those who have older kids and total recall, know that they can be little magnets; missing and worrying about them can take a lot of fun out of a trip, especially after about the third day out; you want to go, but you don't want to be gone. Even if it isn't homesickness, sometimes it's hard to forsake the fatherly duties and stick your wife with 24/7 care of kids. I know one fellow who once traveled the world hunting – until he and his wife adopted two very young children; several links came out of his chain instantaneously. If you are at this point in life, a preserve will get you home in time for dinner every night.

So far, I have been talking mainly about the local preserve, the kind I characterized earlier as a "pheasant farm," not in any derogatory sense, just not a destination someone would travel very far to visit. But there are, of course, destinations, most in the big pheasant states. They can vary widely in price and amenities, but if they've been in business a decade or so, they're going to know how to do the job. These places you'll have to travel for, and you'll pay to hunt, and many of them have released birds (though some specialize in wild birds), so to some hunters, they are the worst of all worlds. What they do have is pretty much guaranteed opportunities to work birds and privacy from competition. Almost all these places welcome your dog, too. These pheasant places have immense popularity with some people – even during the heyday of CRP, many of them were booked solid all year, every year.

The first step up from the pheasant farm-type preserve are the small operators you'll find on the plains. These are mainly landowning farmers who allow pay hunting and may even have room and board available – most of these seem to be wild-bird places, individuals taking advantage of the habitat CRP provides to grow a cash crop people will come from miles away to harvest. Unfortunately, many that have operated for years will have curtailed the hunting and turned much of their land to corn and soybeans.

Still others, as I mentioned, are major businesses that own their land and have first-class lodging and meals, such as



BEN G. WILLIAMS PHOTO

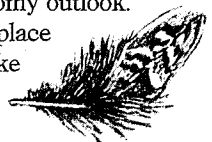
Preserves can run from a local game farm to a family landowner operation to a major business with extensive land holdings.

shelterbelt, figures he can make a thousand dollars an acre with a crop, knows he'll never run enough hunters through it to match that, so those trees come out."

Bollweg feels that the hunting operations that have the best chance of continuing to succeed are those that own their own land and don't have to lease hunting ground, and also charge a high enough fee that what they get from hunting those acres is competitive with what they would get from farming them. "If the farming makes more than the hunting does, the farming's going to win."

Most of Tumbleweed's acreage is devoted to agriculture with a strong emphasis on habitat, with the hunting a "value-added" proposition to the farming, he says. He also says that in the short term, there will be a lot of birds in South Dakota; but as farmers potentially pull walk-in acres out of the state access program to farm them, and as areas that used to shelter birds are cleared and cropped, the population may quickly bottom out.

In the final analysis, as pheasant hunters, we are in for a period of figuring out how to adapt to a gloomy outlook. But there are ways to brighten it. And one place to start is a shooting preserve, either one like Tumbleweed or a day place close to home. I'm pretty sure your dog won't mind.



A state-by-state listing of shooting preserves can be found at www.wingshootingusa.org. It's sponsored by the National Shooting Sports Foundation.

The future is pretty grim when it comes to CRP... but are you really going to quit hunting? Didn't think so.

10,000-acre Tumbleweed Lodge near Harrold, South Dakota, one of the finest outfits of its kind. At this point, it remains to be seen if the conversion of so much CRP acreage back to rowcrops is going to affect such operations, because many of them (though not Tumbleweed) lease the hunting rights to standing grass from nearby – and sometimes not so nearby – landowners.

Michael Bollweg is the co-owner and general manager of Tumbleweed, and he has his finger on the pulse of South Dakota bird hunting: "Farmers are reacting to the market and to their own expenses – diesel fuel is up, fertilizer is going through the roof, as well as the cost of equipment... some of the big tires our farm equipment require are going to China, so the price of those has gone up. [Besides not re-enrolling land in CRP], a small farmer takes a look at a twenty-acre

Hunting Preserves and Gamebird Farms

Preserving Wildlife *and* Rural America

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Built upon foundations of respect for the land and wise use of renewable natural resources, these industries provide significant conservation, social and economic benefits.

For more than one hundred years, private individuals in the U.S. have been raising gamebirds for release into the wilds. Gamebird producers and hunting preserves are licensed and regulated in all 50 states by each state's conservation department. Gamebird producers provide a wide range of birds for hunting preserves (see Figure 1), and for human consumption as well.

Hunting preserves serve the public in many ways besides providing traditional hunting opportunities. According to Jim Trinklein of the Michigan Association of Gamebird Breeders and Hunting Preserves, "In general, hunting preserves offer a wide variety of opportunities: hiking trails, bird watching, sporting clays, 3-D Archery, fishing, safe settings for youth hunter safety classes, family events, dog training, handicap hunting opportunities, business meeting areas, dining and camping—just to name a few.

"Hunting preserves run the gamut from the smallest do-it-yourself operations to the grandest of hunting/outdoor recreation facilities. There is a preserve to fit every taste and budget."

Figure 1

Gamebird Producers — Top Five Birds Produced

Pheasant
Bobwhite quail
Chukar
Mallard
Wild Turkey

Peggy Boehmer



Preserving generational lands...through the economy, ecology, and investments in our future.

Preserves and gamebird farms protect the resources they value without involving state or federal ownership, management or investments. This is accomplished as a private initiative, funded by people with a vested interest in conservation and wise-use of our natural resources.

Conservation Benefits

Even for people who do not visit hunting preserves, such places offer numerous benefits. One primary benefit is that hunting preserves are an oasis for nature and wildlife in otherwise shrinking natural landscapes.

In the mid-1990's, the American Farmland Trust reported approximately 1 million acres of agricultural lands were lost to development each year—lands that can never be restored to their natural state.

However, with demand for quality hunting lands increasing, many landowners are turning to wildlife to realize new sources of income. Many of the acres that were once intensively farmed are being restored and replanted for wildlife.

Hunting preserves are restoring natural habitat to millions of acres of land. This year alone, hunting preserves maintained over **16 million** acres, protecting them from development, protecting wildlife habitat, and keeping the land in the hands of families who have worked it for generations.



Thayne Smith

Hunting preserves can be considered conservation showcases. Preserves provide a beautiful sight to behold, with acres of flowing native prairie grasses, and mixtures of grain and sorghum for wildlife. Ecologically sound, they improve the delicate balance for wildlife by providing much-needed habitat and feeding grounds.

The average preserve maintains at least half their property in natural or native habitat. They practice wise-use with low-till or no-till farming methods and offer natural water filtration. Preserves plant thousands of trees and maintain ponds that benefit all types of wildlife, game and non-game alike.

John Mullin, Editor of Wildlife Harvest magazine and a recognized expert on hunting preserves and their role in conservation said, "People often comment that visiting a preserve is like turning back the hands of time. They can enjoy hunting as it was in their Grandfather's day.

"It's a fact that there is now more wildlife habitat and 'escape cover' on a well-managed hunting resort than there is on a **hundred** average farms—after the crops are harvested." It's no wonder the preserve concept is growing!

Preserves create natural hunting conditions by restoring the land to what it was 50 years ago when fields held large numbers of wild pheasant and fencerows grew thick with cover. Hunting preserves offer the opportunity for young and old alike to savor the flavor of bird hunting as it once was.

Consumer Benefits

Picture this: it's a beautiful fall day. The air is fresh and crisp, you're walking in a field of bluestem and switchgrass, sunlight sparkling on the seed-heavy tips of the grass. The fields that surround you, ablaze with color, are rich with possibilities. As far as the eye can see, nature abounds. The field is bordered by a fencerow and thickets. Somewhere up ahead a cock pheasant cackles. Where can one experience this ideal setting? This scene can be found at many of the fine hunting preserves throughout the U.S.

Images like this beckon outdoor enthusiasts to take to the fields. It is part of the reason the hunting sports attract 19 million participants each year from all walks of life. However, hunting has changed considerably over the past 30 years. Most hunters hail from urban locations, and do not have readily-available access to favorable hunting lands. Additionally, populations of wild upland gamebirds and waterfowl have been dramatically impacted in many areas by shrinking habitat and population pressures. As a result, hunting preserves have increased tremendously both in numbers and in popularity.

Gamebirds Produce Significant National and Rural Economic Impacts

As the popularity of the gamebird production and hunting preserve industries increase, so have their economic impacts. In 2003, the gamebird farm and hunting preserve industries injected over \$1.6 billion dollars into the Nation's economy, which stimulated nearly **\$5.0 billion** in economic activity (Figure 2). Even government reaps rewards, with \$243 million in Federal income tax revenues produced as a direct result of gamebird and hunting preserve-related commerce.

Significant Economic Benefit

These businesses are especially essential to rural areas. Industry expendi-

tures are predominately infused into economically-poor rural areas of America. Additionally, these businesses bring tourists to those communities. The increased traffic supports many other businesses. These expenditures, listed in Figure 3, create jobs that allow young people to remain in the local area, and keep families on their farms. Mark Klippert, owner of Whistling Wings, Inc, in Hanover, Illinois, describes the process well: "The majority of the customers visiting hunting preserves come from large metropolitan areas, which provide virtually no hunting opportunities. They exchange their 'city money' for



Peggy Bochner

Figure 2

Economic Impacts of the Gamebird Business (Gamebird-related hunting preserves and Gamebird Producers)

(Industry expenditures for specific categories plus the resulting economic impacts)

	Industry Expenditures	Multiplier Effect	Salaries, Wages and Farm Profit	Jobs (part and full-time)	Federal Income Tax Receipts
Feed and supplements	\$427,785,612	\$1,479,527,892	\$321,284,731	9,594	\$59,168,370
Wages, salaries, bonuses, and employee benefits	\$248,984,595	\$512,982,960	\$150,585,883	4,955	\$30,557,731
Payments for capital equipment (incubators, vehicles, etc.)	\$47,718,148	\$123,419,382	\$34,840,969	386	\$2,381,717
Payments for capital structures (buildings, pens)	\$149,464,282	\$414,120,687	\$142,872,908	4,125	\$25,441,461
Freight (including boxes and other packing materials)	\$23,394,526	\$71,713,579	\$21,857,505	683	\$4,213,012
Overhead and admin. (rent, interest, accountants, attorneys, etc.)	\$58,486,314	\$112,826,690	\$38,535,055	1,301	\$8,022,657
Medicine and veterinary services	\$36,762,826	\$114,589,729	\$35,023,944	1,294	\$7,980,812
Propane, heating oil and/or other fuels	\$68,512,539	\$164,191,056	\$32,316,831	944	\$5,824,364
Purchase of breeding stock, eggs, chicks or adults	\$203,866,581	\$796,445,571	\$188,107,694	6,748	\$41,616,886
Utilities (electric, phone, city/county water, sewage)	\$86,893,952	\$235,612,952	\$51,762,727	1,225	\$7,556,213
Travel (visit customers, fairs and shows related to gamebirds, etc.)	\$23,394,526	\$56,164,008	\$11,035,015	322	\$1,988,807
Repair and maintenance of buildings, structures and equipment	\$85,222,915	\$274,119,506	\$75,780,216	2,335	\$14,401,327
All insurance	\$61,828,389	\$218,557,173	\$68,870,643	1,818	\$11,210,650
Taxes, licenses and permits (federal, state and county)	\$55,144,239	\$138,519,571	\$36,160,835	1,230	\$7,584,039
Advertising and marketing expenses	\$48,460,089	\$130,624,170	\$44,849,812	1,250	\$7,710,800
Hunting licenses and stamps	\$13,368,300	\$37,611,713	\$9,102,476	259	\$1,599,460
Other (hunter supplies and dogs, habitat maintenance, etc.)	\$31,749,713	\$91,616,395	\$25,224,687	925	\$5,707,101
Total	\$1,671,037,547	\$4,972,643,034	\$1,288,211,931	39,396	\$242,965,409

Figure 3

Annual Operating Expenses for Average Gamebird Producers and Hunting Preserves Offering Gamebirds

(Includes gamebird-related expenses only — expenses related to non-gamebird business are excluded)

	Hunting Preserves Only (Buys All Birds Elsewhere)	Combined Bird Producer + Hunting Preserves	Bird Producer Only (Does Not Offer Public Hunting)
Feed and supplements	\$21,981	\$38,553	\$49,092
Wages, salaries, bonuses, and employee benefits	\$47,196	\$24,075	\$14,357
Payments for capital equipment (incubators, vehicles, etc.)	\$4,843	\$4,011	\$4,402
Payments for capital structures (buildings, pens)	\$14,077	\$12,224	\$14,862
Freight (including boxes and other packing materials)	\$688	\$1,561	\$3,209
Overhead and admin. (rent, interest, accountants, attorneys, etc.)	\$11,489	\$6,544	\$3,264
Medicine and veterinary services	\$4,266	\$3,146	\$3,666
Propane, heating oil and/or other fuels	\$7,430	\$5,732	\$6,693
Purchase of breeding stock, eggs, chicks or adults	\$41,417	\$21,032	\$12,429
Utilities (electric, phone, city/county water, sewage)	\$9,976	\$8,084	\$8,080
Travel (visit customers, fairs and shows related to gamebirds, etc.)	\$2,718	\$2,185	\$2,248
Repair and maintenance of buildings, structures and equipment	\$14,620	\$7,501	\$6,826
All insurance	\$13,278	\$7,430	\$3,106
Taxes, licenses and permits (Fed, state and county)	\$10,285	\$5,257	\$3,909
Advertising and marketing expenses	\$12,246	\$5,518	\$2,252
Hunting licenses and stamps	\$3,027	\$1,634	\$528
Other (hunter supplies and dogs, habitat maintenance, etc.)	\$7,497	\$405	\$2,494
Total	\$227,036	\$154,892	\$141,418

"Quite simply, the public desire for hunting and other outdoor recreational opportunities increasingly exceeds the amount of land available for such activities. ... Private-enterprise has stepped up to fill that demand. Hunting resorts and other private enterprises fill that void nicely."

Senator Kent Conrad (D-ND)

the rustic preserve experience. The preserve very quickly spends this money purchasing renewable resources from rural-based gamebird farms. The gamebird farm then infuses the majority of that money in the local economy, replenishing their stock. Money is spent locally on payroll and products."

The largest investment for most producers is the money they spend to purchase feed from regional feed companies. The feed company in turn has to purchase millions of bushels of corn, soybeans, and wheat to produce their feed products. This is one small example of the large financial impact this industry provides rural America. Figure 4 highlights the rural benefits of gamebird producers and hunting preserves.

In addition, many hunting preserves provide benefits beyond hunting. Many hunting preserves generate income year-round, using their natural and scenic qualities as a setting for business and social gatherings. Many more offer year-round multi-functional recreational opportunities to attract outdoor enthusiasts from across the country, infusing the local economies with money that travels in for unique recreational, business and social experiences (Figure 5).

Figure 4

Percentage of annual expenses spent within the local community	54.9%
Average number of annual guests to hunting preserves	1,585
Average percentage of annual guests from out-of-state	40.9%
Employment	
Average full time employees per operation, including family	5
Average part time employees per operation, including family	3
Percentage of labor provided by family members	64%

Figure 5

Income Sources for Gamebird Producers and Gamebird-Related Hunting Preserves (Reports Percent of Producers and Hunting Preserves Involved in Each Activity)

Sell eggs	30.0%
Sell chicks (all birds less than adult)	41.9%
Sell adult birds	70.4%
Operate a fee hunting operation using birds produced or native birds	31.9%
Operate a fee hunting operation using birds bought from others	39.5%
Other hunting (<i>non-gamebird</i> related hunting)	29.6%
Kennel operator	27.0%
Sporting Clays Operator, Skeet, or Trap	27.3%
Other non-gamebird recreation (wildlife viewing, fishing, golf, etc.)	20.8%
Sell gamebirds for human consumption (in raw or processed form)	31.4%
Lodging	22.8%
Special events, meeting facilities, etc.	28.1%
Other activities not listed above	10.2%

Ours is a business that has as its foundation respect for the land and its inhabitants.

Stewards of the Land

As stewards of the land, gamebird producers and hunting preserves know the majesty of wildlife and wilderness. We respect the game we take and appreciate the opportunity to continue our time-honored occupation.

Ours is a business that has as its foundation respect for the land and its inhabitants. It involves ecologically sound practices and responsible care of the land and water. It is based on the wise use of renewable resources. In addition, it boosts the economy, creating jobs and opportunities for rural families.

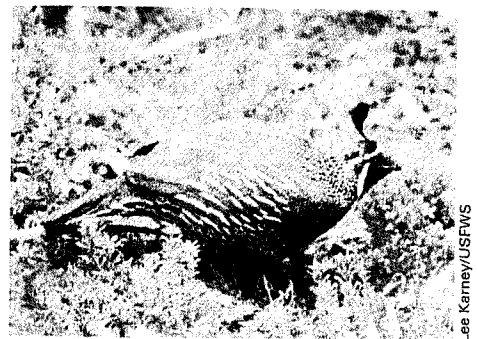
The gamebird and hunting preserve industry is vitally important to the future of rural lands, of wildlife, and of the Nation's economy. Together we can ensure a better quality of life for ourselves and future generations.



Peggy Boehmer



Peggy Boehmer



Lee Karney/USFWS

A non-profit trade association, the North American Gamebird Association (NAGA) has been helping gamebird producers and hunting preserve operators for over 70 years, representing and protecting their interests by working with agricultural administrators, wildlife managers and other government officials at the local, state and federal level. Affiliated members and businesses work together to solve mutual problems and improve conditions for the entire industry.

NAGA is leading the field in providing the highest quality wildlife habitat, land restoration and recreational experiences for generations to come.

NAGA is dedicated to promoting, protecting and improving the gamebird and hunting preserve industries, and promoting strong ethics and *standards of excellence* for its members. A strong NAGA will help secure a healthy future for rural families and for habitat supported by hunting. For more information visit their website at www.naga.org.

The non-profit North American Gamebird Foundation (NAGF) has been created to undertake research and educational projects related to conservation, wildlife management and the gamebird breeding and hunting preserve industries.

Although the North American Gamebird Association has been around for over 70 years, its core foundation has been around since the birth of our country. As this great country continues its technological advances and urban sprawl expansion, it is critical that we as a nation remember our rural heritage.

For more information, please contact the:

North American Gamebird Association

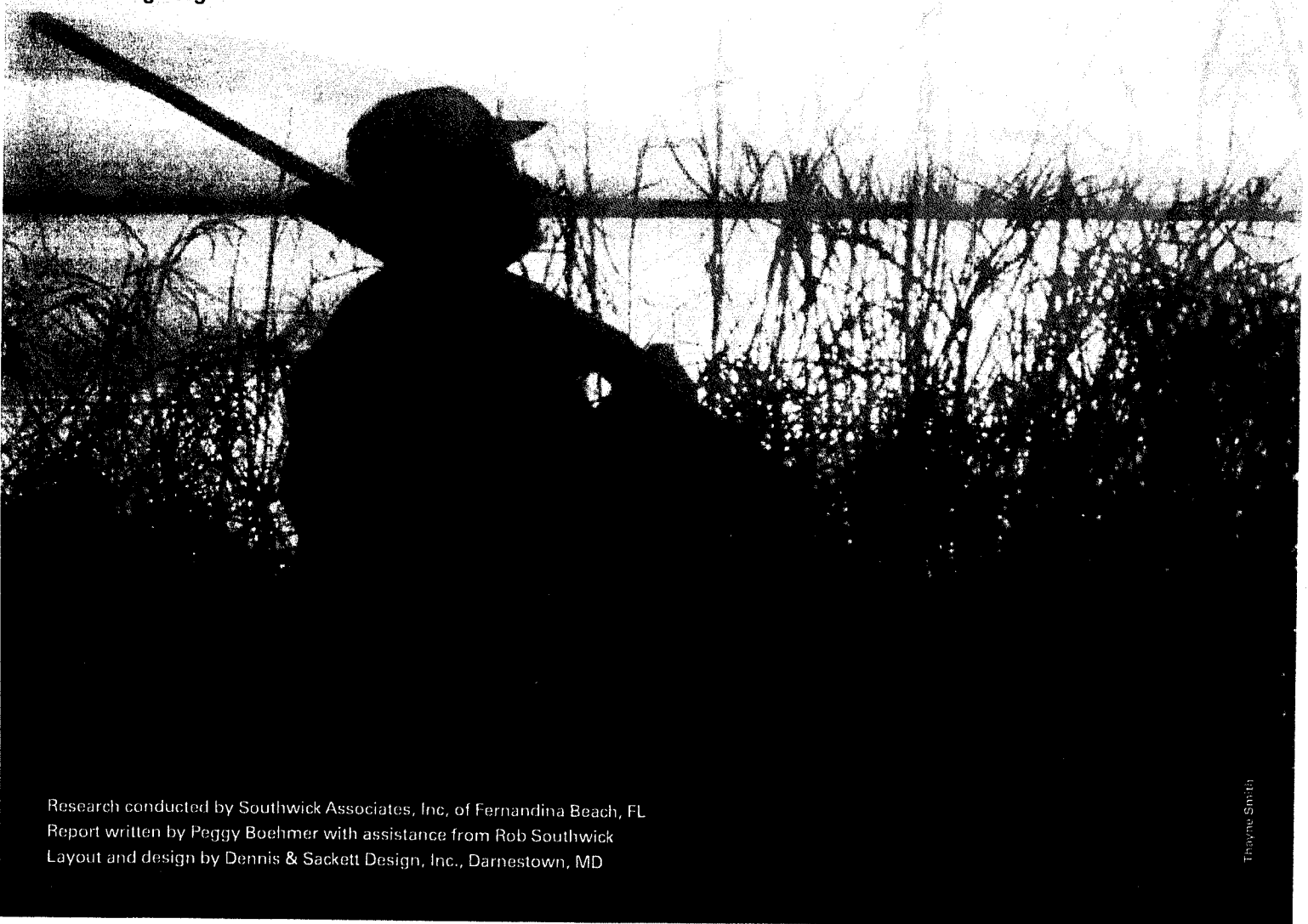
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Research conducted by Southwick Associates, Inc. of Fernandina Beach, FL
Report written by Peggy Boehmer with assistance from Rob Southwick
Layout and design by Dennis & Sackett Design, Inc., Darnestown, MD